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Published in:
Integrative Psychological & Behavioral Science

Publication date:
2008

Document Version
Early version, also known as pre-print

Integr Psych Behav (2008) 42:315–323
DOI 10.1007/s12124-008-9077-4

COMMENTARY

Narrative Form and Content in Remembering

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Published online: 4 September 2008

Abstract Narrative is the primary medium through which experience is represented, remembered and shared with others. It has the tendency to unify experience in an abstract linear form. The degree to which this is done is designated narrative *form*. Mori uses a multidimensional single case analysis to explore how the form of a narrative differs between an experience of real contact with the environment and an experience communicated by another or a 'real' experience repeated several times in conversation. I commend Mori's experimental setup as modeling everyday life activities and for arriving at a theory that applies to *all* cases. However, I argue (using data from my own experiment on narrative and remembering) that the idiographic approach can be fruitfully supplemented with (1) an analysis of the sample as a whole and (2) narrative *content* in addition to *form*.

Keywords Narrative · Remembering · Content · Form · Single case analysis · Aggregate analysis

It is well established that experience is represented, remembered and shared through narrative. Since narrative is always guided by a symbol system for relating and connecting events, narrative construction is "an implicit social act" (Gergen and Gergen 1997, p. 176)—it helps the person make sense of their *own* experience and *communicate* it to others (Chase 1995). Because of its symbolic, meaning-making, and communicative properties, narrative functions as the water we swim in as cultural beings, the collective coin, the vehicle of common sense. Like other 'mediational means' (e.g. a knot on a rope, a picture card or the memory technique of 'chunking'), narrative media shape our experience in particular directions. In narrative, experience is integrated into an abstracted linear form, as opposed to, for example, the concrete immediacy of an image.

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At the same time, we cannot forget that there is an 'irreducible tension' (Wertsch 2002) between 'mediational means,' such as narrative, and the agents who use it. Not everyone will have equally mastered their use, nor will they use them to the same ends. In Mori's experiment we see that embodied experience at first only partially comes under the control of narrative—it retains much of the form of the original experience, mainly 'alternation' between person and world, unstable descriptions of objects, and an expression of motives for action. In time, however, with repeated telling of the narrative, it becomes increasingly conventional, linear, unified and stable. At this point it resembles the narration of experiences conveyed to us by another—in Mori's (2008) experiment the narrative of University B.

In this commentary, I will develop Mori's (2008) insights into narrative *form* and its relationship to narrative *content* using my own experimental data. I will argue that research in remembering can be greatly advanced by using the idiographic methodology, used by Mori, along with an analysis of the sample as a whole. But before proceeding further in this direction I will first consider the place of Mori's methodology more generally in memory research.

Re-membering Methodology

The psychological study of remembering has long been limited by an impoverished methodology. Experimentalists have typically followed Ebbinghaus's example of constraining participants to a high degree. A prototypical scenario involves sedentary participants passively exposed to some near meaningless material, for which they are to later give a restricted reproduction. This setup bars us from studying the transformation of experience in remembering as a meaningful social process. Instead, it encourages us to think of memories as marks made on the mind, for which any memory that deviates from the original object is labeled "distortion" or simply "false" memory.

Mori (2008) breaks through these limitations in his synthesis of Gibonsian (ecological) with a Bartlettian (sociocultural) experimental traditions. Gibson famously critiqued the study of perception by way of immobile participants and introduced the body into psychology, while Bartlett criticized Ebbinghaus's use of meaningless, uncontextualized material replacing it with complex narratives. Both of them attempted to orient psychology to the study of real *individuals* (as opposed to aggregates of individuals) involved in everyday activities with real objects, as active experiencing bodies engaged in a social and physical environment.

Following these research traditions, Mori's (2008) experiment is phenomenologically very close to everyday conversations about local happenings, which involve ourselves or others in the common place telling of narratives. He explicitly links it to the context of an "interrogation," in either a courtroom or police station. An experiment is certainly not an everyday life context, but may *model* one. As with all models only certain feature carry from the model to the real situation – for example, a toy train will *model* features like changing of tracks but not the workings of the engine. In Mori's case, the fact that there were direct parallels between the 'real' criminal case he mentions and the experiment he ran testifies to its successful modeling features of remembering occurring outside the laboratory.

Another unique characteristic of Mori's (2008) methodology is his focus on the single case. This was a standard experimental practice in Pre-World War II European psychology and was only displaced for non-scientific reasons (Toomela 2007). These early methodologists believed that it was only by looking at the single cases that we can construct a theory that applies universally. In contrast, Loftus' (1975) work on eyewitness testimony only shows a difference between two *groups* of participants, not each participant. Thus, she cannot say with her findings *which* participants are confabulating; but only that it will happen in some cases, some of the time.

On the one hand, a well designed experiment may be applicable to all cases. For example, Ebbinghaus had only one participant in his sample (himself), and his results have been easily replicated for over a hundred years now! But on the other, one might still wonder about the validity of generalizing from a single case. It might be asked, how can we see the diversity of thought forms in only one case? Mori (2008) partially solves this problem by designing an experiment to create the conditions to study two different forms of remembering—remembering our embodied experience and remembering another's communication of their experience.

However, although Mori's (2008) experimental design is sufficient for his particular goals, this approach in general leaves unexplored the diversity of ways in which *different* participants might narrate their experience. Sample size should increase until the sample reaches 'saturation', i.e. when the research ceases to discover anything new by adding extra participants. Thus, if three distinct participants give the exact same responses we can move on to another population or consider this sufficient for our purposes. In the next section I will consider how we can make comparisons within a sample to help us to explore individual cases.

Narrative in the Recall of 'Apparent Behavior'

Mori's (2008) use of single case analysis and multidimensional analysis of narrative form should be commended. He shows that direct contact with the environment at first only partially comes under the influence of narrative media; early narrations of the experience will contain many features of the original embodied experience, such as perception/action cycles (i.e. 'alteration'), unstable descriptions of objects and the motivation for action, whereas a retold narrative (either one's own or another's) tends to smooth out these features to create a more linear, coherent and unified narrative form. This is the direction of change narrative media afford.

I will argue here that this kind of analysis can also be fruitfully supplemented with an analysis of both, the *sample as a whole* and the *content* of a narrative. To argue this I will make use of data from a study conducted to explore the role of different narrative frames in remembering (see Wagoner, in press). In this study I utilized Heider and Simmel's (1944) celebrated "apparent behavior" film, in which geometric shapes (a big triangle, a little triangle and a circle) seem to interact with each other, such that the film unfolds as a kind of story.[1] Participants project a wide range of narratives onto the film to familiarize it—for example, some saw it as a kind of domestic conflict. We can call this the narrative *content*. It should be noted that this experiment misses the

[1] The film can be watched online at: http://www.anthropomorphism.org/psychology2.html

rich embodied experiences captured by Mori, but it can still help us to understand the role of narrative in the transformation of experience while remembering.

In regards to narrative *form*, I classed participants into three groups, which I will refer to as *strong*, *weak* and *non-narrative* framing. Strong narrative framing was characterized by a temporal structure that spanned the whole sequence of events with consistent characterization (stable descriptions of the shapes), developed relationships between shapes and with intelligible motivations for actions. Weak narrative framing participants lacked these features, while the two non-narrative framers did not see the film as being about intelligent agents at all. A pattern quickly arose in which strong narrative framers *remembered more* and *transformed less* events than weak narrative framers. By 'transformed' I mean changed the order of events, substituted one shape for another, or added an event to the story. Table 1 describes these differences.

To elucidate this narrative *form* and also to explore the analysis of narrative *content*, let us consider a single case—that fits comfortably into the strong narrative framing category. This participant remembered slightly less events than others in the category but still more than the average for the weak narrative framers. And what she did remember is totally accurate, i.e. there are no 'transformations'.

> There was a line drawing of a room, with a door. And there was a large triangle [*T*] inside the room. And then a smaller triangle [*t*] and a circle [*c*] came along the outside. Ok, so at some point the *T* sort of noised its way out the door. And I remember thinking as I was watching this interaction this could be read in two ways: either you could see the *T* coming out and being threatening towards the other two or perhaps *T* is feeling threatened by the approach of these other two. I wasn't sure. But the *c* and *t* acted really differently. *c* seemed to be more afraid and was moving away from *T* whereas *t* was very pointy and aggressive. They were being quite aggressive to each other. And there was quite a bit of moving about being pointy at each other. And, umm, at one point *c* ended up going inside the room. And it kind of, looked like it was sort of hanging around. I don't know if I'm anthropomorphizing or what here. *c* seemed to be sort of watching what was going on and sneaking, trying to get to a safe place, and went to the room. But eventually *T* came back into the room. And *c* went straight to the corner trying to get as far away from *T* as possible. It was not going to confront the triangle like *t* was. And then *t* came in, I think. And there was more interaction between those two. No, before *t* came in, *T* at first seemed to have its attention focused still on *t* outside and then turned its attention to *c*, who was trying to get away from it, then *t* came in, I think. And then engaged *T* more. And then, everyone ended up outside. There was some chasing around the room. And, oh goss how did it end up? Who ended up back in there? I can now not remember

Table 1 Differences between strong, weak and non-narrative framing

	Number of participants	Events remembered	Transformations
Strong narrative framing	10	9	0.6
Weak narrative framing	8	6.5	2.13
Non-narrative framing	2	4	2.5

after all this talking we've been doing whether *T* reclaimed its territory as it were. Or [pause] I can't remember how it ended.

This participant uses a *territory conflict* as her 'schematic narrative template' (Wertsch 2002), what I call a 'narrative frame', i.e. the underlining narrative structure that holds the pieces together into a coherent whole. Later, I learned that she was highly involved with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, though she was completely unaware that she was using this structure to interpret and remember the events of the film. There is consistent characterization of all the shapes, using the same names, attributing the same motives and personalities, etc, and a consistent focus on the territory conflict throughout. Specifically, she attends to who is responsible for the conflict and is quite clear from the beginning that she will not take sides. Also, only her and one other participant (N=20) held *t* partially responsible for the conflict. She also avoids saying *T* chased *t* and *c*, as other participants did, preferring the vague, "there was some chasing". The strong framing of the film as a conflict over territory also seems to block her from remembering the end of the film. She asks, "Who ended up back in there?" This is the logical ending given her narrative template but it has nothing to do with the actual last events of the film, in which *t* and *c* leave the screen and *T* spins around—in what looks like anger to most—and "breaks" the rectangle into pieces.

It is only by comparing the participant's narrative to the material that generated it that we can analyze systematic qualitative changes in narrative content (see Wagoner 2007). Bartlett (1932) was the first to master this methodology. He found that remembering of stories was mediated by the social conventions of the society to which the participant belonged. Thus, for the Native American story *War of the Ghosts*, British participants readily changed 'canoes' into 'boats' and 'hunting seals' into 'fishing', as well as omitting the foreign names and any references to the supernatural. These are changes observed between the original and the reproduction; they cannot be observed in the reproduction alone. What sets Bartlett apart from more recent memory experiments is his focus on the single case and his openness to the systemic and qualitative nature of changes that ensue in remembering: in the place of memory 'distortion' he focuses on the 'constructive' aspects of change and how they might relate to the participant's life outside the laboratory. We are doing something similar in our analysis of the above narrative: first, we analyze changes in a single case as organized and meaningful; second, we consider them in light of the participant's interests, history and cultural background. But even Bartlett made analyses at the level of the general sample—e.g. how many participants changed 'canoes' to 'boats'—and further he uses it to highlight cases deviant from the norm, e.g. only one out of 20 participants remembered the proper names of the Native American villages. Let us now move forward with this analytic strategy to highlight and explore a deviant case in the current experiment on narrative form and content.

What We Can Learn from Deviance

Our deviant participant remembered slightly less than the average number of events for strong narrative framing, however, she was the only participant in this classification to transform three events. Her narrative is highly anthropomorphic with the use of words

like "angry," "alarmed" and "escaped". Let us look at her elaborated narrative to consider why three transformations might have taken place:

> There was an angry triangle in a box. That hmmm opened the door to his box and had a look outside and found a little triangle [*t*] and a circle [*c*], looked quite playful. And then he started, pointed his little triangular face at them. And they seemed quite alarmed and kind of being pushed away and then there, it seemed like they were tricking him a bit. Then the other triangle [*T*] opened the door to his hatch and snuck into his box and was in there for a while. And then, came back outside again. And in the mean time, the baby triangle [*t*] had been pushing the *c* around for a while. And at that point, I think, *T* went back into the box and came out again. There was a lot of movement and *c* went into the box. *T* followed him in. There seemed to be a lot of force at the point. So whenever *T* pointed its pointy face *c* kind of got displaced to a different corner of the box, in quite swift non-jagged movement. *c* left the box and *T* peered its head out and *t* and *c* disappeared off the scene. And then *T* seemed to get really angry and frustrated and smashed his box apart with his pointy face.

After her narration, the participant explains that *T* was "a grumpy… quite old guy" and the other two were "young playful characters" (both male). These characters get cast into a master narrative centering on the single conflict of the youth joking around and agitating the old (in the old's territory). It is a kind of *Denis the Menace* (well known American cartoon) narrative, in which Denis is always causing trouble to Mr. Wilson, in his property, while Mr. Wilson becomes increasingly angry and frustrated. The form of antagonism in this narrative is only surface deep—Denis and Mr. Wilson are in reality quite attached. It is thus highly significant that her later comments, "at the end when they [*t* and *c*] left the scene all together and *T* starting smashing his walls down, I thought that he was actually quite upset that they'd gone. I think he missed them, despite it all."

We get the sense from her narrative that *T* wants to be left alone, whereas both *t* and *c* enjoy teasing him after they get over their initial alarm. *T* angrily pushes them away when they disturb his peace and quiet and once they are out of the way he returns to his own activities in his box, though he remains agitated. Thus we can explain many of her omissions: she says nothing about the fight between *T* and *t* outside the box (nearly all the other participants do), nor anything about the chase between *T* and the smaller shapes (which over half of the participants mention something about). For her the conflict must be understood as arising from *t* and *c*'s interference in *T*'s life and is settled as soon as *T* pushes them out of his space. For this reason she is clear in the interview that *c* was just as confrontational as *t*, which was a unique attribution in my sample (N=20).

Now that we understand the form and logic of her narrative, how should we interpret the transformations that occur in it? She includes two cases of *T* entering and then exiting his box alone. In the original this occurs only once after *T* has chased the other two shapes. Also, in between these two events she inserts "the baby triangle had been pushing *c* around for a while". It is hard to know what to make of this attribution of conflict—she is the only participant to think of *t* as "pushing" *c* around here. My reading, based on her whole narrative framing, is that she interprets the event that others see as *t* and *c*'s joyful reunion as playful fighting and includes it at this early point to create a smoother narrative. However, it could also be argued that the event was a mixing up of who had what roles in the fight between *T* and *t*. In any case, all

three of these transformations fit her general narrative of *T* only being aggressive to a point—*t* and *c* are also held responsible for causing trouble. Additionally, the transformations help her to avoid including events that would not easily fit her narrative frame, like *T*'s fighting with *t* at a distance from the house and *c* moving away from the conflict. In fact, she makes the transition out of her confabulation to the event where *c* enters the box with the very vague expression "there was a lot of movement," as if to cover up the unknown event. Similarly, *c*'s entering is interpreted as motivated not from fear (which is the common causal connection made other participants) but rather is another form of joking, i.e. playing with *T*'s things.

By attending to this deviant case, we see that it is not just a matter of strong and weak narrative framing (i.e. narrative *form*) but also which narrative frame is used (i.e. narrative *content*). A strong "domestic conflict" narrative frame does not tend to produce transformations, nor as many omissions for this film. This frame seems to map onto the sequence of events directly, whereas the *Denise-the-menace* narrative frame can be used but requires a more active spinning of the frame to the sequence of events to make it work, which results in a number of transformations.

Priming Participants with Particular Narrative Frames

To test and develop the findings of the experiment just described, I am now conducting an experiment in which I give participants a narrative frame in advance, to interpret and remember the film by. So, for instance, I tell participants I will show them a film about "a territory conflict," "a domestic conflict," "a liberation from prison," etc. I expected that these different narrative frames would map onto the film in different ways, directing what is remembered, forgotten and transformed for each narrative frame. Some of this does seem to be taking place; however, the most significant change to occur is between the above described experiment and the present one. Giving participants a narrative frame in advance resulted in narratives in which much of the second half of the film was left out (including events that the majority of participants included in the first experiment) and for which there were several cases of *generalization* of events, in which multiple events were summed up in a single event. This occurred even after I gave much more explicit instructions to tell the story 'step-by-step from beginning to end' (before this even more omissions were made).

Putting the two experiments together one can say that narrative reveals and conceals, constrains and enables, transforms and stabilizes our experience and memory of it. This is done to varying degrees depending on how strongly a participant is framing an experience—the most strongly, in this case, would be those primed with a particular narrative frame. Priming participants with a narrative puts a powerful constraint on the form and content a narrative assumes in remembering; it sets up both a situation of communication *and* a way of seeing the world.

Conclusion

In this paper I have celebrated Mori's (2008) methodology in light of psychology's history and have elaborated upon it with two general methodological points: First, I

have advocated a methodology that moves between individual case analysis and the sample as a whole. It is only by working between these two that we can recognize and begin to explain deviance. We should remain focused on the single case but use aggregate statistics to help us tease apart the particular organization of a single case. Second, I have argued that in analyzing narrative *form* we need not throw out an analysis of narrative *content*; rather, we should simply consider narrative content more flexibly than traditional memory researchers have done. Instead of labeling any deviation from the original "distortion" or "false" memory (as if memory was a mark left on the mind that faded in time) we should explore the qualitative nature of changes in remembering, how it relates to the means of remembering (what narrative frames are used and how strongly). By opening methodology for the study of remembering in this way I hope to encourage other breakthroughs in the field comparable to Mori's important advances.

Acknowledgements This paper was written with the support of the Gates Cambridge Trust and the Overseas Research Student Award Scheme. I must also thank Hala Mahmoud for her comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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